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EDITORIAL COMMENT

HISTORICAL "FIRSTS," "EXCLUSIVES," AND "INCOMPARABLES"

Prof. Frederick J. Turner once criticized a former student in his kindly, helpful, but perfectly frank and decisive manner for calling a distinguished pioneer state-builder whose career was under discussion a "great man." "Able, and influential, no doubt," said he, "but not great."

That comment struck home. The young neophyte was quite old enough and experienced enough in history to know that the title "great" applies properly in the rarest cases only. But biographical study is a seductive thing. Its essence is the contemplation of a given career isolated from other careers. This person had so filled his mind with the virtuous deeds and words of his favorite, his delight at the evident strength and originality of intellect growing with every new manifestation of it encountered in the sources, that almost unconsciously he came to express a judgment which was not intellectually discriminative and objective, but subjective and emotional. To correct that error required a distinct effort to see the subject in a perspective favorable to the assessment of his merits compared with those of other men.

The reason why biography is such a disappointing branch of history is illustrated by the above example. Without in the least wishing to exculpate the young scholar, in whom for many reasons I might be deeply interested, it is still true, as all are aware, that discriminating biographical judgments are the exception rather than the rule. We are all tempted to ascribe to those about whom we possess special knowledge a superiority over others about whom we know less; and the degree of the assigned superiority has a suspiciously close relation to the degree of fullness of our special knowledge.

The same principle applies rather widely in historical matters other than the biographical. Examples are particularly apt to occur in the domain of local history. We were told long ago that “the pole of the earth sticks out visibly in the center of every man’s town or village.” And most of us, when we undertake to write about our “town or village,” assume that the pole sticks up high enough to enable the whole world to see the glorious banner we are going to fling out from its pinnacle. The local historian, like the biographer, tends to become obsessed with the idea that his town is ahead of others, and for the same reason—the absence of knowledge about others to correct the distorted outlines of his picture. Just as the cities of ancient Greece contended for the honor of being the birthplace of Homer, so most modern towns, through their historian spokesmen, try to lay claim to some unique distinction, something in which they are *exclusive*, if not exclusive then *first*, and if not first at least *incomparable*. I do not now remember to have read any local history which was wholly free from such amiable indulgence in community self-gratulation, and frequently the basis of it is most unsubstantial.

A little more than a year ago, to my profound regret, I had the misfortune to wound the feelings of a local landmarks committee which was engaged in a most laudable work, when I objected to the wording of their proposed inscription; on a permanent bronze tablet, which recited that “the annals of Indian warfare show no parallel” to the battle the marker commemorated. As a matter of cold historical fact, the story of that battle, while revealing admirably the bravery, hardihood, and fighting morale of the few white soldiers engaged, is remarkable chiefly as the sole military incident in the annals of an otherwise uniformly peaceful neighborhood. One need not mount higher in the reading of Indian war history than the struggle

of the Puritans against the Pequot to find "parallels" to the particular battle to which allusion is here made. Local patriotism, however, insisted on the *incomparable*, and thus will it stand doubtless to the amazement of future generations. It goes without saying that some of the claims to the distinction of having the "first white child" in county, state, or region, the first mill, the first pottery, the only this, the greatest that, must of necessity be true. The difficulty is that, since local writers have a natural desire to distinguish their own localities they are tempted to put forward such claims indiscriminately, on hearsay evidence, with little or no previous investigation.

That is a tendency I hope to forestall in the cases of contributors to this magazine (who thus far have afforded us very few occasions for particular criticisms) by presenting the above considerations. To make a critical examination of proffered manuscripts is obviously an editor's duty. For, while on the negative side the magazine assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors, there is a positive moral obligation to be as helpful as possible to those who generously devote time and effort to the preparation of articles, and it is no kindness to permit a writer to commit historical errors in print. If we were all careful of our "firsts," one large class of potential errors would disappear.

NORTHERN WISCONSIN—REVELATIONS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENSUS

Thirty years ago it was customary for denizens of the older Wisconsin to think and speak of northern Wisconsin as if it were some foreign and almost alien country, containing limitless pine and hardwood forests, mill towns, and scattering lumber camps. Hardly at all was the region thought of as one possessing an established agricultural character, or even agricultural possibilities similar to those